Excavating ghosts: Urban exploration as graffiti archaeology

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Abstract:	Based on several years of near-nightly excursions into London's disused, non-public, forgotten, subterranean and infrastructural spaces, this article considers the significance of discovering years- or even decades-old surviving traces of graffiti ("ghosts", in graffiti parlance) in situ. The article also draws on extensive ethnographic research into London's graffiti subculture, as well as in-depth semi-structured interviews with several generations of graffiti writers. The article proceeds in four parts. The first part reflects on three sources of methodological inspiration: unauthorised urban exploration and documentation; more-or-less formal archaeological studies of graffiti; and "ghost ethnography" an emergent methodological orientation which places an emphasis on absence and the interpretation of material and atmospheric traces. The second part of the article considers recent theoretical work associated with the "spectral turn". Here, ghosts and haunting provide useful conceptual metaphors for thinking about lingering material and atmospheric traces of the past. The third part of the article offers some methodological caveats and reflections. The fourth and final part of the article seeks to connect theory and method, and asks what significance can be drawn from unauthorised encounters with graffiti "ghosts".

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> Yes! It's only a couple of names… but it's also memories, a story of identity, distant screams for recognition frozen in time then fleetingly glanced before they are 'finally' consigned to history. Shit like this isn't everyone's cup of tea but for those of us that give a fuck this is our archaeology. This is OUR fucking history... (Drax WD, 2014)

Introduction

We skulk down a side street, out of view of the evening traffic and swivelling CCTV cameras; quickly wriggling into scratchy orange hi-vis vests and donning hard hats. It is a deceptively simple disguise: the anonymous uniform of construction and maintenance workers confers an aura of plausibility that allows the wearer to transgress spatial boundaries unquestioned. I pull on a pair of work gloves, snapping their elasticated cuffs against my wrists as we saunter back across the main road. After a quick glance up and down the street – (no police, or, for that matter, actual workmen, who might call our bluff) – I heave open a hatch in the middle of the pavement as passers-by gaze oblivious into their smartphones. Once Andy is at the bottom of the ladder, I pass our rucksacks down, before squeezing into the manhole. Hunching my shoulders, I slowly lower the hatch over my head,

pulling it shut with a resounding CL-UNKKK that reverberates through the darkness.

The air is thick with a sour mouldy smell. I turn on my headtorch with a click and the darkness yields a volume. Our torch beams sweep through a haze of dust that hangs suspended in the air. We are stood on a grilled metal gantry platform at the top of a twenty-or-so-meter-deep circular shaft that plunges downward beneath our feet. Silently, we descend into the void. Layers of crust crunch and break away from the rungs of the access ladders as I grab at them. At the bottom of the shaft water pools on the floor, reflecting our torch lights and the dirty yellow ember of a burnt out fluorescent strip light in the distance – somehow still electrified. We catch our breath and begin to take in our surroundings as the adrenaline subsides. At our feet: dead leaves, crumbled polystyrene cups, empty crisp packets and a discarded copy of the London Evening Standard. A white tiled corridor – the walls covered in decades of grime – snakes off in front of us, and the slow rumble of Underground trains – somewhere above or below – thunders through the tunnels.

We creep slowly forward. On one wall a tattered, faded poster depicts a beaming housewife, advertising a long-forgotten brand of soap. Andy's camera clicks and whirrs. A pale glow spills across the floor. Tentatively, I poke my head into an adjacent stretch of tunnel, illuminated at intervals by bulkhead lights. Glistening calcium stalactites hang suspended from rusting cast iron tunnel segments that stretch out into the distance. In a cross passage, streaks and busts of spraypaint crisscross back and forth over the brickwork, blistered and worn, spelling out the

names of those who once also stalked this sprawling subterranean labyrinth, but are now no longer here:

ZOMBY TOX03 FUEL DDS

OZONE SHAM COSA BOSH

SUBONE SCARE89

I am struck by the realisation that this place is haunted by a secret past: one unwritten in the annals of history yet inscribed into its very materiality; silent assertions of absent presences – identities etched into place.

The present article seeks to connect crime (vandalism), media (material inscriptions) and culture (subcultural history and geography). The article considers the criminological implications of discovering decades-old residual traces of graffiti – or "ghosts" in graffiti parlance – whilst exploring and documenting London's disused, forgotten, non-public, and otherwise off-limits spaces. The article proceeds in three parts. The first part reflects on three sources of methodological inspiration: unauthorised exploration and documentation of off-limits spaces; more-or-less formal archaeological studies of graffiti; and "ghost ethnography" an emergent methodological orientation which places an emphasis on *absence* and the interpretation of material and atmospheric traces. The second part of the article considers recent theoretical work associated with the "spectral turn". Here, *ghosts* and *haunting* provide useful conceptual metaphors for thinking about lingering material and atmospheric traces of the past. The third part of the article brings together

theory and method, and asks: what significance can be drawn from unauthorised encounters with graffiti "ghosts"?

An exploratory method: Three sources of inspiration

Urban exploration: 'lost ecologies'

During the past four years, I have conducted extensive ethnographic research into London's graffiti subculture, as well as in-depth semi-structured interviews with some of the city's most prolific graffiti vandals from past and present (see XXXX). Although this research certainly informs the approach taken here, the present article is based primarily on my own ongoing research into, and exploration and documentation of, London's abandoned, disused, forgotten, non-public, and otherwise off-limits spaces (XXXX). As such, the present article can be read as a kind of criminological by-product of several years of near-nightly excursions into these urban and infrastructural interstices.[1] I have discussed this research – along with its legal and ethical implication – in detail elsewhere (XXXX). Here, I want to connect this work with an ethnographic excavation of the

[1] The present work may, accordingly, be read as an instance of Ferrell has termed *interstitial ethnography*: a methodological orientation that 'promotes a sensitivity to spaces that exist in between and around the edges; it suggests a way of seeing the world glancingly, out of the corner of one's eye, with an awareness that the most important action may take place out of frame and out of focus' (2016: 227).

material traces of graffiti found in these sites, via a discussion of method, and a theoretical engagement with the spectral.

Many of the places with which the present article is concerned can be thought of as architectural *glitches* where, as the city is continually retrofitted, renovated and reconfigured, the stacked superimposition of successive (infra)structural elements *traps* the intervening spaces – *holes* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) or *bubbles* (Sloterdijk, 1999) – between the rigidly rectilinear planes of late capitalist urbanism. In urban planning terminology, they are "space left over after planning" (SLOAPs) – a kind of negative intervening space between the city's 'official zones of use and occupation': with no commercial or residential value, they quickly become disused or ignored; retained only as service areas, with access preserved in anticipation of future maintenance work (Papastergiadis, 2002: 48).[2] Entombed behind façades of sterile stainless steel cladding, bricked up or buried, these in-between spaces also function as time capsules: a kind of accidental, historic cache of material culture. They are, to use Jeff Ferrell's term, 'lost ecologies': spatially and temporally interstitial urban 'ruins' (2004: 258; 2015). Whilst exploring these places, in addition to finding newspapers, posters and other ephemera dating as far back as the 1950s, I have

[2] These types of spaces have been conceptualised as 'parafunctional' (Papastergiadis, 2002; Hayward, 2012). Often perceived as 'abandoned, empty or derelict', parafunctional spaces are 'blind spots in the urban landscape', they exist in the "white space" on the map (Papastergiadis, 2002: 48). However, such spaces 'never remain purely empty': rather, they are the site of 'counter-narrative for urban life' (Papstergiadis, 2002: 48, 45).

frequently encountered remaining tags and "throw-ups"[3] left by graffiti writers, some of which are recognisable as many years or even decades old. Within the graffiti writing subculture, such traces – either unsuccessfully removed, or simply worn and weathered by the elements – are known as "ghosts". In these hidden spaces, sheltered from the elements and spared from "the buff" (graffiti removal by local authorities), these enduring traces of paint and ink reveal a counter-history to what are typically thought of as 'non-places' (Augé, 1995): anonymous, asocial and utilitarian spaces of circulation, characterised by an ostensible absence of history, sociality and identity. Moreover, since we can trace the genesis of subcultural graffiti in London back to the early 1980s,[4] I would argue that these early surviving residues are not insignificant contemporary subcultural-historical artefacts – all the more remarkable since a relatively small amount of the graffiti produced during this period was ever documented (see Drax, 1993).

The research method employed herein can, accordingly, be positioned as a form of "urban exploration": the practice of researching, gaining access to and

[3] Whereas tags are broadly analogous to a signature, throw-ups consist of quickly executed one or two-colour bubble- or block-letter words.

[4] See, for example, Ashford (2013: 150-1, *inter alia*). That subcultural graffiti in London originated during this period is also widely corroborated by interviewees: "London graf goes back to about '81, '82… Graffiti had obviously kicked off in New York in the '70s and cousins and family friends and that would send letters back to London, or Londoners would go out there to see family and they'd see this stuff [and so] it started to spread very slowly [to the UK]'.

documenting forbidden, forgotten or otherwise off-limits places (see Edensor, 2005; Ninjalicious, 2005; Garrett, 2013; XXXX). In recent years, an emergent global subculture has coalesced around this activity. Although the motivations behind urban exploration are, in general, multiple, diverse and shifting (see XXXX), of particular relevance to the present article, it remains a practice 'intensely interested in locating sites of haunted memory, seeking interaction with the ghosts of lives lived' (Garrett, 2013: 30).

Whilst the term 'exploration' connotes voyages of discovery and remote scientific expeditions, the deployment of exploration as a research method within an urban context is not without precedent. Indeed, if we conceive of 'urban exploration' more broadly as the 'adoption of the practices and discourse of exploration in the context of cities' (Castree et al., 2013: 540; see Pinder, 2005), we might position the approach taken here within a methodological lineage spanning the investigations of nineteenth century social reformers Henry Mayhew (1862) and William Booth (1890); the urban ethnographies of the Chicago School sociologists (Park et al., 1925); and the inner-city 'expeditions' of the radical geographer Bill Bunge (1977).[5, 6] Moreover, and as I have suggested

[5] For critiques of the problematic imperial, colonial and exclusionary discourses and visual regimes which span this methodological lineage, see Pinder (2005) and Mott and Roberts (2013). The normative, privileged and exclusionary facets of urban exploration in particular can, should and have been acknowledged and challenged (see, High and Lewis, 2007; Bennett, 2011; Mott and Roberts, 2013, 2014; Garrett and Hawkins, 2014; XXXX).

elsewhere, criminologists would do well to exploit the potential of urban wandering, exploration and infiltration – in their various forms – as immersive spatial research methods, capable of producing a Geertzian (1973) 'thick description' of place (XXXX and XXXX).[7]

In addition to deploying urban exploration as a research method, the approach taken here draws on two further sources of methodological inspiration: more-or-less formal archaeological analyses of graffiti; and ghost ethnography – an emergent methodological orientation that foregrounds an attentiveness to absence and the interpretation of material and atmospheric traces. In the remainder of this section, I discuss each of these methodological influences in turn.

Archaeological excavation

The second source of methodological influence for the present article is archaeological excavation: the study of human cultures through the exposure,

[6] See also Walter Benjamin on the 'art of straying' and his own 'fantasies' of the Paris Metro's 'maze... of tunnels... opening their hundreds of shafts all over the city' (1932 [1979]: 298-9).

[7] The direction of an ethnographic approach towards the analysis of space and place is not without precedent (see, for example, Mayne and Lawrence, 1999; Corsín Jiménez, 2003; Pink, 2008; Aoki and Yoshimizu, 2015).

recording, analysis and interpretation of their material traces. Significantly, archaeologists have in recent years 'begun to turn their attention away from symbols of authority and towards the daubed, painted and scratched writings of the disadvantaged, the excluded or the subversive in society' (Oliver and Neal, 2010: 15). Accordingly, several more-or-less formal archaeological analyses of graffiti have been undertaken to date, with ancient (Baird and Taylor, 2010), medieval religious (Champion, 2015), military (Merrill and Hack, 2013), and convict graffiti (Casella, 2016) having all been shown to reveal a myriad of insights into past societies and their material culture.[8,9] Notably absent from this body of work, however, is any archaeological analysis of subcultural (i.e. tag-based) graffiti (see Castleman, 1982; Ferrell, 1996; Macdonald, 2001).[10]

Arguably of closest relevance to the present study, is an article recording and interpreting graffiti by members of the notorious 1970s punk band, the Sex Pistols (Graves-Brown and Schofield, 2011). Appearing in the usually conservative archaeological journal, *Antiquity*, the article's publication was met with widespread controversy (see, for example, Jones, 2011). However, if we are willing to look beyond the pompous dismissal of "low" culture, and consider

[8] In 2014, 'graffiti archaeology' also earned an entry in *The Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology* (Ralph, 2014).

[9] In Cesare Lombroso's early study of prison graffiti (1888), the criminal anthropologist positions himself 'as a kind of archaeologist', comparing 'his study of the "prison palimpsests" to those of antiquity and prehistory, his own project the assembly of a "codex" of these inscriptions of foreignness' (Spector, 2016: 33-4).

[10] Although see Merrill (2015) for a discussion of subcultural graffiti as heritage.

contemporary graffiti 'more broadly as a marking practice – as a form of trace and a manner of performing one's presence and place in the world' that has been practiced for millennia (Frederick, 2009: 213) – there seems little reason why we should not approach it with the same seriousness as that from thousands of years earlier (Graves-Brown and Schofield, 2011).

As Graves-Brown and Schofield note, the interpretation and analysis of graffiti can reveal 'feelings and relationships, personal and political', it can inform us of its social and spatial context, and can present us with 'a layering of time and of changing relationships over time' (2011: 1399). Perhaps most importantly, whilst some of this information might be gleaned from other (sub)cultural-historical documents – such as (auto)biographies, photographs, books, fanzines, films and documentaries – graffiti's *materiality* offers something uniquely visceral, immediate and affective (ibid). However, whilst graffiti is certainly amenable to more conventional archaeological analyses, here I want to advance a more processual and reflexive approach; an exploratory mode of enquiry as much to do with the search as with the find. With this in mind, a third source of inspiration can be drawn from an emergent methodological orientation: ghost ethnography.

Ghost ethnography

Recent years have seen an increasing interest in *ghosts* and *haunting* as conceptual metaphors within the humanities and social sciences. This 'spectral

turn' (Luckhurst, 2002) has thus far been a largely theoretical enterprise (and discussion is therefore reserved for the following section). However, in attempting to think through how we might find, research and 'listen' to social "ghosts" – the disjointed, uncanny, other, no-longer or not-quite-there *absent presences* that "haunt" the margins of everyday life – at least two commentators have proposed an attendant methodological orientation or sensibility. Firstly, the cultural anthropologist Justin Armstrong (2010) has reflected on the possibility of undertaking a 'spectral' ethnography: the application of (auto)ethnographic methods in studying *absence*. Spectral ethnography constitutes 'an anthropology of people, and places and things that have been removed... or abandoned to the flows of time and space' (2010: 243). Armstrong's approach is one that shares archaeology's concern with excavating the material traces of human culture; but which also, crucially, cultivates an awareness of the affective and atmospheric 'resonances' left behind in places now abandoned, isolated or forgotten: 'the spectral presences of people' no longer there (ibid: 245; 246).

Of particular relevance to the present article, spectral ethnography is concerned with those unseen, abandoned, isolated, disused, transient, peripheral or 'hollowed-out' spaces that are frequently thought of as "non-places" (Armstrong, 2010; see Augé, 1995). This method of inquiry asks:

> What significance can be drawn from the multiple layers of time and materiality that have accumulated in these places and what type of haunted narratives can emerge from the discarded remnants of human occupation?

> How can ethnography excavate the lives-once-lived from the space of abandonment? (Armstrong, 2010: 243)

In order to answer these questions, Armstrong advocates a highly subjective, reflective, imaginative (even speculative) form of (auto)ethnography that 'allow[s] these spaces and their associated material cultures to speak for themselves… through the lens of the ethnographers positionality' (ibid: 246). The resulting 'reading' is inevitably highly interpretative and impressionistic.

Taking influence from Armstrong, the cultural criminologist Jeff Ferrell has recently discussed the possibility of engaging the social and cultural 'spectres' or 'apparitions' that *haunt* the margins of everyday life, through what he terms 'ghost ethnography' (2015, 2016). Ferrell connects the conceptual metaphors of ghosts and haunting (discussed below) with the notion of 'social death': a term used to describe the condition of marginalised groups who are denied a social or political identity, or who are perceived as less-than-fully human (see, for example, Patterson, 1985; Cacho, 2012). These groups – amongst which Ferrell counts refugees, the homeless, struggling addicts, and registered sex offenders – must 'learn to live as ghosts, as apparitions, as spectres: on the edge of social life, but never quite visible within it' (2015).

Whereas much sociological and criminological research necessitates careful observation of the often ephemeral or barely perceptible details *present* in social life, studying such social, cultural and spatial *ghosts* requires, Ferrell suggests, an ability to 'excavate absence' in order to be 'able to see who is not there' and 'who

is no longer there' (ibid). Ghost ethnography thus 'invoke[s] the criminological imagination', to look 'beyond the present instant' in order 'to search for what is now gone or never was' (Ferrell, 2016: 227). In 'trac[ing] the ghosts of exclusion, the women or immigrants or homeless folks never allowed in', in 'record[ing] those… who have drifted away and those arrangements that have been lost to historical change', and in 'accounting for the ghostly presence of these losses that lingers in our lives', ghost ethnography also engages a 'politics of absence' (ibid). Of particular relevance to the present discussion, ghost ethnography also engages the city's abandoned, interstitial, and in-between spaces or 'ruins'. Thus, it is also a form of what we might call '*interstitial ethnography*': one that 'promotes a sensitivity to spaces that exist in between and around the edges' (Ferrell, 2016: 227, emphasis in original). Such an approach asks: 'In any city, what constitutes the ruins of that city? And where, among those ruins, would we hope to find the ghosts of urban life?' (2015).

Figure 1. "THE SUPREME TEEM" - 1980s handstyles in a disused tunnel under central London. Reproduced with permission. © The photographer.

One foreseeable criticism of a proposed "ghost ethnography" is that ethnography *proper* entails communicating with, and gathering data from, (living!) human subjects – through observation, interviews, and so on. To what extent can "ghost ethnography" really be considered an ethnographic method, if ethnography, at least as it has conventionally been practiced, has fundamentally to with studying *ways of living* – or is the term simply a

misnomer? I consider some of the inherent epistemological challenges presented by an ethnography of *absence* in the final part of the article. At this juncture, however, I want to suggest that the "ethnography" in ghost ethnography might denote an assumed *sensibility* over and above than any prescribed set of methodological practices (e.g. participant observation; see, Schatz, 2009). Accordingly, ghost ethnography denotes an exploratory, situated, immersive, reflective, impressionistic and imaginative approach to the study of space and place: an ethnographic '*way of seeing*' the material traces and affective residues of social worlds (Wolcott, 2008).

Within criminology, such an approach might draw on cultural criminology's experimental use of new forms of scholarship – such as narrative, vignettes, "true fiction", photography and documentary filmmaking (see Ferrell et al., 2008). However, this approach can of course be supplemented with more traditional qualitative methods. Indeed, Armstrong suggests that this 'holistic and reflexive exercise in cultural analysis' can complement, or be complemented by, 'more established approaches to ethnographic fieldwork, such as face-to-face interviewing and participant observation' (2010: 246).

Ghosts in the city

The spectral turn

Alongside the methodological approaches proposed by Armstrong and Ferrell, recent years have seen an increasing interest in ghosts as a conceptual metaphor – a *theoretical motif* – within the humanities and social sciences (see, Pilar Blanco and Peeren, 2013).[11] The origins of this 'spectral turn' (Luckhurst, 2002) are often traced to the publication of Jacques Derrida's *Spectres de Marx* in 1993 (and its English translation, *Spectres of Marx*, the following year; see Derrida, 1994). However, a pertinent and seemingly overlooked earlier use of this theoretical trope can be found in a 1988 essay, entitled 'Ghosts in the city', by the French cultural theorist Michel De Certeau. In this essay, De Certeau addresses the contemporary redevelopment of Paris in language surprisingly evocative the speculative "regeneration" of large areas of London today; describing the systematic 'elimination' of urban places steeped in history, in favour of a homogenous 'city of glass' (1988: 133).[12]

For De Certeau, urban planners' conceptions of the city as a 'tabula rasa' for urban renewal are 'disrupted' – or rather, '*haunted*' – by '"resistances" from a stubborn past', the 'ruins of an unknown, strange city': the ghosts of the 'already

[11] Readers are also directed to the edited collection by Pilar Blanco and Peeren, 2013, and the special issue of *Cultural Geographies* on "spectro-geographies", vol. 15, no. 3.

[12] It is interesting that, in a temporal reversal of De Certeau's hauntology, the growing number of "buy-to-leave" residential properties now being built in global cities such as London – bought as assets by wealthy foreign investors, and 'intentionally and permanently left unoccupied until they appreciate and are sold at some later date' (Norwood, 2016) – threatens to turn large swathes of these cities into 'ghost-towns of the super-rich' (Herrmann, 2014).

there' (1988: 133, emphasis added). The material traces of the past – historical facades, derelict buildings, old cobblestone streets and, indeed, graffiti – articulate a kind of spatial 'unconscious': an often indecipherable, opaque and ambivalent antipode to the unambiguous functionalism of modernist planning (De Certeau 1988: 133-5, *inter alia*; see Hayward, 2012). Scathing of formal heritage practices, De Certeau declares that such 'gestures' – the minutiae and ephemera of everyday life – 'are the true archives of the city' (1988: 141). 'They remake the urban landscape every day. They sculpt a thousand pasts that are perhaps no longer nameable', yet 'structure no less [the] experience of the city (1988: 141-2). It is interesting that, for De Certeau, these scattered fragments 'are witness to a history that, unlike that of museums or books, no longer has a language… Their histories… are no longer "pacified", nor colonized by semantics', but rather are 'wild, delinquent' (1988: 135). In drawing our attention to this ineffable, pre-linguistic quality of 'haunting', De Certeau anticipates the emphasis later accounts would place on its *affective* and *atmospheric* qualities (see below). Perhaps most importantly, however, De Certeau suggests that it is the 'opaque ambivalence' of these residual 'oddities that makes the city liveable' (1988: 134).

We can read De Certeau's essay as an early approximation of what Derrida (1994) would later term 'hauntology'. In its original formulation, this concept, or 'puncept' – "hauntology" sounding very similar to "ontology" in Derrida's native French – refers to 'the way in which nothing enjoys a purely positive existence. Everything that exists is possible only on the basis of a whole series of absences, which precede and surround it' (Fisher, 2014: 17-18; Derrida, 1994). Accordingly, hauntology replaces the priority of 'being and presence with the

figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive' (Davis, 2005: 373). In recent years, several critical theorists – notably Mark Fisher (2012, 2014) – have broadened and developed Derrida's definition. Though hauntology, for Fisher, remains concerned with the dialectical interplay of absence/presence, it has primarily to do with a sense of *temporal dislocation* or 'time out of joint'. Haunting, for Fisher, 'happens when a place is *stained by time*, or when a particular place becomes the site for an *encounter with broken time*' (2012: 19, emphasis added). The kind of ineffable and ambiguous affective impressions, evoked by De Certeau, formed in encounters with residual material traces of the past ("ghosts") are clearly one such example of this. Indeed, Fisher is keen to point out that 'hauntology concerns a crisis of space as well as time' (2012: 19). Specifically, although the 'erosion of spatiality' characteristic of capitalist globalization 'has been amplified by the rise of what Marc Augé calls the "non-place"', haunting 'can be seen as intrinsically resistant' to this 'contraction and homogenization of time and space' (Fisher, 2012: 19).

The cultural geographer Steve Pile (2005) has also evoked both the figure of the ghost and the notion of haunting, in arguing that we should take seriously the imaginary, fantastic and emotional aspects of city life. 'Haunting', for Pile, reveals 'the significance of time and memory in the production of urban space. Haunting is closely associated with place': "ghosts" 'haunt places, spaces or locations' (Pile, 2005: 131). Interestingly, Pile anticipates Fisher's suggestion that haunting has to do with 'broken time' (2012: 19). For Pile, 'ghosts destabilise the flow of time of a place. They change a place's relationship to the passage of time' (2005: 131). 'Ghosts are figures that disrupt the linear procession of time that leads from the

past, through the present, to the future' (ibid: 139). Moreover, haunting, for Pile, is an encounter with 'fractured and fragmented' time (ibid: 148): a kind of temporal dissonance, where 'suddenly, the past can make its presence felt' (ibid: 137). Such encounters 'bring to light the heterogeneity of temporalities in modern city life' (ibid: 136), and reveal the simultaneous co-existence of 'innumerable pasts' (ibid: 143). These histories and memories are multiple, often irreconcilable and contradictory: 'Ghosts are not coherent. They do not have one story to tell, or have one relationship to the living' (ibid: 162; see XXXX). 'The city is marked, then, by its multitude of ghosts; heterogeneous ghosts; a density of ghosts' (Pile, 2005: 162). Furthermore, evoking Ferrell's discussion of ghost ethnography, Pile suggests that to be 'alert… to the presence of ghosts', 'requires a particular kind of seeing' (ibid: 139).

It seems at least part of what De Certeau, Fisher and Pile are concerned with in their discussions of haunting is 'the phenomenology of place': particularly how memory and materiality inform or inflect our lived experience of place (Bell, 1997: 813). For Bell, ghosts 'give a space social meaning and thereby make it a place' (ibid: 820). Of particular interest, Bell alludes to the 'kind of sacred electric *charge* about [a] place' precipitated by 'the imagined presence of those who are not physically there' (ibid: 822, emphasis added). In doing so, Bell evokes the *atmospheric* aspects of haunting. In everyday speech the term "atmosphere" is used interchangeably with "mood", "feeling", "ambience", "tone" and other ways of naming collective affects, yet until relatively recently such phenomena have rarely been explicitly theorised (Anderson, 2009: 78). Such ineffable *auras* – a 'strange tissue of space and time' (Benjamin, 1991, quoted in Böhme, 1993: 117)

– are of patent relevance to criminology. Consider, for instance, the palpable "lull" in the moments before a riot breaks out: 'that heavy atmospheric threat of something about to burst', the 'strange tension in the air, a feeling of excitement and vague expectant fear' (quoted in Horowitz, 2001: 89). Fear of crime is frequently attributed to an unpleasant and hostile atmosphere, yet the precise nature of this peculiar malaise is rarely, if ever, interrogated. My own research has also suggested that recreational trespassers and others engaged in 'edgework' activities seek out the illicit atmospheres to be experienced in off-limits places (XXXX; see Lyng, 1990, 2004). Intriguing work from outside criminology has shown how atmospheres are now actively engineered as a novel and insidious modality of social control (see, for example, Adey, 2008; Bissell, 2010). Yet scant attention has been paid by criminologists to the character or constitution of atmospheric effects.

Talking to ghosts? Reflections on method

Before continuing, I want to offer two brief reflections on method. The first has to do with the informal, impromptu nature of the research under discussion. As noted earlier, the graffiti "ghosts" that constitute the focus of the present article were inadvertently encountered during the course of (auto)ethnographic research into another subcultural practice: recreational trespass, or "urban exploration" (see XXXX). As with former exploratory incursions (see XXXX) the idea that my encounters with these residual traces might comprise 'data' for a criminological journal article

was, to be frank, an afterthought. Furthermore, and as I have written elsewhere, the extent to which my own recreational trespassing can be said to constitute (auto)ethnographic "research" is itself something of an open question (XXXX). My motivations for engaging in this practice are multiple and diverse but, I confess, personal enjoyment, architectural and historical geekery, thrill-seeking and one-upmanship all, frankly, eclipse any strictly academic interest in "urban exploration". Accordingly, my own trespassing – and, it follows, the "method" for the present article – lies somewhere between autoethnography, embracing what Ferrell (1997) has termed 'criminological v*erstehen*' – the idea that in order to fully understand criminality, we have to immerse ourselves in the 'criminal moment' – and a form of "post-methodological" criminology, 'that has moved beyond method as a formal procedure and toward more fluid, holistic, and personal forms of inquiry' (Ferrell, 2012: 227; see Ferrell, 2009).

The reflections that follow thus derive from an opportunist, partial, fragmentary and sketched early approximation of criminological ghost ethnography. Ethnography is, after all, an inevitably 'fluid and idiosyncratic undertaking' (Ferrell, 2009: 13). Future iterations of this methodological approach might well involve a more sustained, purposive and formalised approach – perhaps experimenting with the transposition of visual ethnographic or audio documentary methods. However, as Ferrell (2009) notes, we should be wary of reifying the ethnographic method. As 'all good ethnographers know', he writes:

> **the field researcher's deep engagement with subjects and settings renders any preordained methodological prescriptions provisional at best. Ethnographic research techniques are in reality not deployed; they are negotiated… invented or reinvented on the spot and not infrequently discarded in the dangerous, ambiguous, interactive process of field research (ibid: 12-13; Ferrell and Hamm, 1998).**

Secondly, I want to reflect on the challenges inherent in "talking" to "ghosts" in the present context. Put another way, to what extent 'is it possible to gain empirical knowledge of culture without the presence of its usual sources' (Armstrong, 2010: 248) – perhaps first and foremost amongst which are living people? According to conventional, empiricist ethnographic approaches, many of the sites with which ghost ethnography is concerned are marked by a notable '*absence* of immediately apparent', observable 'and quantifiable ethnographic data' (ibid, emphasis added). Armstrong's response is that:

> **Put simply, it is not empiricism that [ghost] ethnography seeks; rather, it moves toward an understanding of subjectivity and reflection in ethnographic practice and presents linkages [with] spatial, ideological, and material resonances in the abandoned and isolated spaces of cultural production (ibid).**

The task of ghost ethnography is thus to excavate the traces of past lives and cultures that have been inscribed into the materiality of place, and to allow these 'ghost texts' – 'haunted' spaces and objects – to speak for

themselves (ibid: 246). In light of this, prospective ghost ethnographers would do well to engage with recent methodological developments inspired by so-called 'non-representational theory' (see, X, Y, Z).[13] 'Although complex', non-representational theory can essentially be understood as:

> an attempt to move beyond static geographic accounts of landscape in a bid to create an alternative approach that actively incorporates the experiential, affective, and inter-material aspects of space that rarely feature in traditional representational geography (or, for that matter, in most criminology). (Hayward, 2012: 449)

Accordingly, the emergent methodological orientation of *non-representational ethnography* emphasises the materiality, atmospheres and backgrounds of everyday life; foregrounding the relationships between people, objects and the built environment (Vannini, 2014). Furthermore, traditional, empiricist or "realist" ethnographic writing posits the representation of its research subject(s) as a more-or-less faithful rendition of the world based on observable data. Such approaches are inevitably problematic when trying to account for the precognitive, non-discursive, atmospheric, affective, and indeed spectral dimensions of

[13] As Campbell has noted, NRT has a 'considerable resonance' with a cultural criminological approach that 'emphasizes the subjective, affective, embodied, aesthetic, material, performative, textual, symbolic, and visual relations of space' (2012: 401).

everyday life. Non-representational ethnography, by contrast, does not attempt to report such experiences in an impersonal, neutral or "reliable" manner (ibid: 318). Rather, although inspired by ethnographers' lived experiences in the field, non-representational ethnography is impressionistic and creative (ibid). Non-representational ethnographic styles 'strive to animate rather than simply mimic, to rupture rather than merely account, to evoke rather than just report, and to reverberate instead of more modestly resonating' (ibid). Perhaps most importantly, non-representational research 'advocates resolute experimentalism' (Dewsbury, 2009: 321). And in much the same manner, I would like to suggest that prospective "ethnographers" of the spectral – whatever ethnography might come to mean in this context – experiment determinedly with new permutations of research settings, objects, methods and writing styles.

Places stained by time

> People want to inscribe marks and find traces in the city, like the stories they used to tell about the stars and constellations, in order to feel more at home in an indifferent universe. (Baker, 2012: 280)

What significance, then, can be drawn from unauthorised encounters with residual traces of decades-old tags and "throw-ups" left by graffiti writers in London's hidden, disused, forgotten, off-limits and interstitial spaces? At a fundamental level, these "ghosts" reveal how bygone illicit visitors saturated such sites with subcultural significance and mythopoeic meaning. As I have written elsewhere (XXXX), tags are read by graffiti writers as physical extensions of their peers' individual or group personas, and thus have an inherent sociality. Moreover, for those familiar with the chirographic conventions of graffiti, the 'flow' or 'style' of a tag can denote all kinds of information about its author's subcultural credentials and competence (ibid; see below). It also follows that an accumulation of tags on a wall can indicate who's been where with who, and when. A wall with numerous tags and throw-ups on it provides graffiti writers with an:

> opportunity to tell stories about the exploits of their peers... to narrate a scenario; not only who was here, but who was here first, who has beef with whom, who's more talented, who's in from out of town... whose tags are getting better, and whose are getting worse. (Snyder, 2009: 69)

Thus, a wall or door with 'heavy layers of graffiti reveals a history to its viewers in the same way that the sedimentary layers of ancient ruins inspire archaeologists to tell tales of past civilizations' (ibid: 70). On occasion, whilst exploring these sites, a veritable *stratigraphy*[14] of graffiti revealed itself: a

[14] Stratigraphy in archaeology refers to the layered accumulation of material culture over time.

palimpsest of blistering and faded paintwork, crumbling brick and rusted iron revealing successive layers of subcultural history – a rich historical cache of accumulated material cultural requiring interpretation (see Figure 2).

In several instances, I have been fortunate enough to have been accompanied by graffiti writers during such unauthorised expeditions. Upon uncovering some surviving tag or throw-up, these writers would often narrate second or third-hand accounts, passed-down stories – oral histories, perhaps even subcultural myths – about their predecessors' escapades.[15] Sometimes, as a way of reaching back through history and connecting with their own subcultural ancestry – the desire to inscribe themselves into this venerated place becoming unbearable (Garrett, 2013: 67) – they would add their own tag before we passed on: a kind of spray-painted séance. **On other occasions, having enquired within the graffiti writing community as to the provenance of some discovered "ghost" tags, I have been able to speak directly with the authors of such**

[15] Such narratives (as well as first-hand accounts) can be found in abundance on the kind of digitally driven, informal archives of graffiti history that have proliferated in recent years on photo-sharing websites such as Flickr (see Schutt, 2017; Cianci and Schutt, 2014). Readers are encouraged to peruse, for example, the groups, *Old School London Graffiti* (https://www.flickr.com/groups/oldschoollondongraffiti/pool/), and *British Train Graffiti 85-93* (https://www.flickr.com/groups/britishtraingraffiti85-93/pool/). These online images, like their counterparts in physical space, slowly erode and fade according to a process of digital degradation, whereby each time a JPEG is compressed, 'something of the original image is lost, and the anomalies and imperfections hiding beneath' the surface 'are slowly revealed' (Meier, 2013).

inscriptions. Photographs of surviving tags can evoke nostalgic memories, emotions, experiences and sensations, and elicit anecdotes of bygone antics, loyalties and rivalries. Viewed in this light, these spectral traces of paint and ink – often hidden from view, or otherwise barely perceptible or unintelligible to the untrained eye – reveal a hidden counter-history to what are typically thought of as 'non-places' (Augé, 1995) and challenge the assumption that these spaces are 'ageless' or 'static' (Oliver and Neal, 2010: 20).

Figure 2. Graffiti stratigraphy: layered tags spanning over two decades, in a now-disused deep-level stabling sidings tunnel in the London Underground. Reproduced with permission. © The photographer.

Related to the subcultural significance that can be read from graffiti, are the more properly *hauntological* qualities of graffiti "ghosts". Many of the old tags encountered whilst exploring disused, interstitial and off-limits spaces are identifiable as such since they are followed by a year (for example, SCARE 89 or TOX 03). What is most striking, however, is that such inscriptions – even when they are not accompanied by a year – are immediately recognisable (to those familiar with the chirographic conventions of subcultural graffiti) as hailing from another era. This is because the "handstyle" – the spacing, skew and calligraphic flare or "flow" – of these tags is noticeably consistent with that of earlier

generations of the graffiti subculture in London (and, thus, an earlier stage in its stylistic evolution).[16]

Additional clues can be deduced from other aspects of graffiti's physical form. The "skinny" appearance of some tags suggests that they were painted using "stock" caps – the standard-issue nozzles with which auto and radiator spraypaints are sold – and thus perhaps predate the development of specialist graffiti paint and caps. Other media (such as glass etchant fluid) and tools (such as chisel-tipped permanent markers) have become more or less widely available and used over time, and can thus provide further hints as to the provenance of a given piece of graffiti. As one graffiti writer I spoke to remarked: "Even the paint has a history! You see certain colours and [think], "Man, that's a Buntlack black" or "That's a Japlac red", "That's a Smoothrite" or "They stopped making that colour"". Thus, particular colours or palettes can also connote certain periods in time.

For these reasons and more, the experience of happening upon surviving graffiti "ghosts" – an 'encounter with broken time' (Fisher, 2012: 19) – is often an

[16] "Style" is governed by an esoteric and unspoken set of principles, foremost amongst which, and 'hardest to understand' is the 'mystical quality' known as "flow" (Siege 52, 2009: 68). 'It seems straightforward in concept – it's how the piece flows, rolls, travels from left to right. But there's a practiced science to it, one that every writer who cares about style has studied... It's how [the letters] overlap and touch, how a letter holds itself up against the one next to it... the shapes of the spaces in between the letters, are as important as the letters themselves' (ibid).

arresting one. There is something jarringly *uncanny* about this experience, in the Freudian sense of the word: ghostly, "strangely familiar", out of place – or, rather, out of time.[17] Whilst such inscriptions adhere to the familiar aesthetic logic of subcultural graffiti, their specific styles, colours, names, and so on appear somehow "out of joint". 'It is like the eruption of dreams or unconscious thoughts into consciousness. As in dreams, the fixity of space and the linearity of time give way' (Pinder, 2001: 11). Moreover, these fragments of broken time invite us to imagine an-other era – evoking an altogether different city: perhaps a kind of simulacratic nostalgia for the London of the seventies, eighties and nineties, experienced – imagined? – vicariously through popular (sub)cultural representations such as Bob Mazzer's analogue photographs of the London

[17] The uncanny, 'uncannily enough', writes Fiddler, 'is a slippery concept', one difficult to pin down (2007: 196). As described by Freud in his essay, *Das Unheimlich*, the uncanny refers more to a constellation of ideas than a strict theory as such (ibid). Nevertheless, central themes in Freud's writing on the uncanny are the ghostly; the "strangely familiar"; and that which seems out of place, or out of time. Moreover, the uncanny is that which is normally 'concealed and kept out of sight' (Freud, 1919: 224-5). Of particular significance to the present discussion, the notion of the uncanny has attracted interest in both architectural theory and urban studies (see, for example, Vidler, 1992, and the edited collection by Huskinson, 2016a). Huskinson suggests that the city can be described as uncanny 'when it reveals itself in a new and unexpected light... its familiar streets and buildings suddenly appear strange' (2016b: 1) – evoking De Certeau's notion of an urban 'unconscious', articulated by '"resistances" from a stubborn past' (1988: 133).

Underground, "jungle" drum and bass, or early London graffiti videos such as *Steel Injection* (1994), *Londonz White Trash* (2001) and *London Tonight* (2010).

Discovering or excavating – *exhuming? exorcising?* – these ghosts also entails retracing the steps of those who left their marks, as well as inhabiting, however momentarily, the same spaces and places in which they left them. This *process* of discovery takes on an additional layer of significance for at least two reasons. First, if our aim is indeed to direct an ethnographic approach towards an analysis of space and place, in order that we might excavate hidden meaning from found material traces of human (sub)cultures, then we should substitute or supplement "deep hanging out" (Geertz, 1998) with *deep loitering*. Ghost ethnography necessitates lingering: soaking up smells, soundscapes, textures and, indeed, atmospheres. In the present instance, this is important not least because the affective, emotional, visceral and sensorial dimensions of graffiti writing are central to the experience of, and motivations for, engaging in the practice (see, for example, Scannell, 2002; Halsey and Young, 2006). Furthermore, it is through this kind of attentive engagement with the textures and atmospheres of urban space that one is made aware of the lingering 'spectral traces' – the *absent presences* – of those 'who were apparently' here 'earlier but who have now moved on or are missing' (Pinder, 2001: 9). In forgotten recesses, deep below the cacophony of the metropolis, we find traces of bygone others, 'etched visually' into 'the materiality of the place itself' (Turner and Peters, 2015: 319). Here, a haunting tension between past and present, absence and present makes itself felt.

In our relationship with conventional sites of historical and cultural importance, we often 'rely on the voice of a guide, a narrator or an expert to mediate our relationship and to explain why the place is significant. Less often do we let places speak to us directly' (Garrett, 2016: 81). The time-worn materiality of graffiti "ghosts", by contrast, reveals a hidden history, sociality and (sub)cultural significance to places in a uniquely immediate, visceral and affective manner. Traditionally, graffiti 'has been a very private and insular scene with very public' – albeit often esoteric, incomprehensible and ephemeral – 'output' (Payne, 2005: 161). Graffiti's illegality, secrecy, rivalry and egotism have ensured that historical accounts of the subculture have tended to consist of conflicting narratives, self-promotion and misinformation as much as they have resembled "faithful" historical documents. Graffiti, accordingly, does not lend itself to a singular, authoritative, historical interpretation. Rather, in undertaking 'unguided tours, without permission' or 'formal elucidation' (ibid: 73, 75) we encounter a multiplicity of 'embedded' – literally, *inscribed* – 'narratives' (Armstrong, 2010: 245; see XXXX and XXXX). Foreknowledge plucked from Internet forums and blogposts; the stories of friends who have been there before; subcultural folklore, myths and rumours; and our own speculation and imagination 'all contribute to the types of spectralities we might encounter' therein (Garrett, 2016: 78). If the furtive exploration of such places can indeed be considered a kind of 'rogue archaeology' (ibid: 87), it is one which adopts an approach 'that *listens*, *gathers* and *assembles* rather than coheres and orders': privileging the sensory, affective and atmospheric (Dobraszczyk et al., 2015: S29, emphasis in original).

Second, the embodied experience of retracing the steps of early generations of London graffiti writers is also significant in and of itself. Graffiti writers traverse the city and its interstitial spaces in a transversal and capillary manner: slipping down back alleys, stalking through fire escape corridors and stairwells, descending ventilation shafts, squeezing through service ducts and prying open the city's cracks in order to reach the "spots" they choose to paint – such as the depots ("yards") and sidings ("layups") in which rolling stock is stabled overnight (see Ferrell and Weide, 2010). Details of how to access such locations are passed down through successive generations of writers – a kind of **illicit[18],** arcane, cumulative, embodied knowledge:

> It was about secrets, hiding spots… skeleton keys, folklore… How to get on to what line and where. How to get into certain yards. This knowledge could only be earned or passed on once respect had been gained by other (better) writers. (Payne, 2005: 161)

Graffiti writing then, comprises a set of esoteric 'spatial practices' (Lefebvre, 1991): including both the act of writing graffiti, as well as these enduring routes and pathways, by means of which the subculture is reproduced. 'Excavating' these 'pathways' (Pinder, 2001: 11) – or "get ons" as they are known in graffiti

[18] Foucault referred to such insights of deviant, criminal and outsider groups as 'subjugated', 'disqualified' or 'insurrectionary knowledges' (2003: 7-8). De Certeau's notion of "tactics" is also instructive in conceiving of illicit spatial practices. De Certeau uses the term to designate those 'innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate space' (1984: xiv). A tactic is 'determined by the absence of a proper locus... it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power... it is a maneuver within enemy territory' (De Certeau, 1984: 37).

parlance – thus taps into a kind of kinaesthetic tradition. Accordingly, accessing and lingering in disused, non-public, hidden and otherwise off-limits spaces, can be thought of as a form of criminological *verstehen*: an 'immersion in the situated logic and emotion that define criminal experience' otherwise unavailable to the researcher (Ferrell, 1997: 3).

Conclusion: Towards a ghost criminology

As Jeff Ferrell has recently remarked, graffiti 'is entirely almost a kind of ghostly activity' (2015):

> Aggressive urban surveillance, environmental design and broken windows policing… limit available locations for painting… graffiti, and promote the legal destruction of existing work. All of this is of course backed up by the daily endeavours of countless anti-graffiti contractors and graffiti clean-up crews, who busily go about buffing… and painting over tags and throw-ups. The result is counter-intuitive but it would seem, indisputable: as pervasively visible as we take… graffiti to be, the vast majority executed over the past half century is now distinctly and decidedly invisible. The… graffiti that we see so widely today is but a small portion of that which has been lost or is currently hidden away, and in any case only the latest layer in an urban palimpsest of spray paint and whitewash. Graffiti… hide[s its] own history; [its] very visibility enacts [its] ongoing invisibility. (Ferrell, 2017: 33).

Graffiti, for Ferrell, thus resembles a 'ghost in the machinery of the contemporary city' (ibid). A 'spectral presence', graffiti is simultaneously 'there and not there, made to appear and disappear 'while you were sleeping'… Coming and going as a series of urban apparitions' (ibid). In this article, I hope to have shown that the spectral atmospheric resonances that 'flow forth' (Böhme, 1993: 117) or 'seep' from (Turner and Peters, 2015: 315) the material traces of graffiti endure long after their authors have departed. In this way, as Mark Fisher so evocatively put it, place becomes stained by time.

Beyond graffiti, how and why might criminology seek to engage with 'ghosts' and 'haunting'? We need not look far for suggestions. Travis Linnemann (2015) has recently invoked the spectral in his study of the murders which form the subject of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. For Linnemann, violence, terror and horror *haunt* both the social imaginary and specific locations, 'animat[ing] social space with spectral power' (Linnemann, 2015: 517). In London's Whitechapel district, Auschwitz, and the site of the former World Trade Centre buildings, *ghosts* – atmospheric resonances, traces or afterimages of 'people, places and things' – 'linger' in the collective conscience (Linnemann, 2015: 517). **Moreover, evoking these kinds of sites, notions of haunting might also contribute to a *cultural victimology of place* (see Walklate et al., 2011). Writing on so-called 'dark tourism' at sites of imprisonment, murder and genocide, has already engaged with the spectral (Hughes, 2008; Wilbert and Hansen, 2009; XXXX) However, work from within victimology also stands to benefit from the conceptual metaphors – *images to think with* – offered by notions of haunting and the spectral. Such motifs furnish us with the theoretical**

language necessary to explicate how memory and trauma become inscribed literally, symbolically, affectively and atmospherically in space and place.

Keith Hayward, drawing on the work of the postmodern theorist Frederic Jameson, has argued that we 'now inhabit a world of simultaneity' in which the past and future are flattened 'into an incessant and uninterrupted present' (2004: 64, 66; see Jameson, 1991). Whilst Hayward is concerned with the (criminogenic) implications of this temporal collapse at the level of individual subjectivity, Simon Hallsworth has pointed toward the broader political ramifications of late capitalism's "culture of now". 'To grow up in a neoliberal capitalist culture is to find yourself in an anomic space', Hallsworth writes, 'where historical memories and any connection to a past history of struggle have been utterly attenuated. It is to inhabit a present wholly disconnected from the past that determined it' (2011: 174). It is this social and cultural amnesia that Franco Berardi has described as 'the slow cancellation of the future' (2011: 18). One prospect is that a critical criminological engagement with *haunting* – the (re)connection of the past, through the present, with "lost futures" – could perhaps provide an antidote to this cultural dyschronia.

Perhaps most importantly, an attentiveness to spectral resonances – the ghostly atmospheric and material traces of the past – connects criminology's renewed interest in the lived experience of (urban) space with a visceral apprehension of (sub)cultural history, and an appreciation of the discontinuous, distorted and multiple temporalities of the city. Many cities are currently undergoing an era of

unprecedented change. The urban landscape is being dramatically reconfigured in ways that both reflect and perpetuate grotesque socioeconomic inequalities. In London, at the same time as vast swathes of urban space steeped in history are being lost to speculative "redevelopment", archaeological excavations undertaken during the construction of the Crossrail subway line have unearthed 17th Century plague pits, Roman roads and Bronze Age artefacts – peeling back layers of time buried beneath the asphalt. Once the archaeologists have conducted their hurried surveys and withdrawn to the surface, tunnel boring machines chew and churn their way through the urban substrata, consigning countless other fragments of broken time to the spoil tip. Perhaps in decades or centuries to come, others will stalk these tunnels – future ruins of subterranean London – asking questions of discarded hi-vis vests, tags dated "2020", the scrawlings of bored track workers preserved written in the dust, and the detritus of a capitalist metropolis. In the meantime, more quotidian encounters with the past can be sought throughout the city – above and below. Scattered fragments of the past – residual anomalies – haunt the homogenous 'city of glass' in spite of planners' desires for an urban 'tabula rasa' (De Certeau, 1988: 133).

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Figure 1. "THE SUPREME TEEM" - 1980s handstyles in a disused tunnel under central London. Reproduced with permission. © The photographer.

1201x802mm (72 x 72 DPI)

Figure 2. Graffiti stratigraphy: layered tags spanning over two decades, in a now-disused deep-level stabling sidings tunnel in the London Underground. Reproduced with permission. © The photographer.

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